

October 14, 2009

Obey Statement on U.S. Policy in Afghanistan and Pakistan

WASHINGTON, DC -- When the Appropriations Committee approved the supplemental request for Pakistan and Afghanistan funding earlier this year, we made it quite clear in the Committee Report that the Administration needed to evaluate the tools available to implement whatever strategy the United States decided to follow.

The point we tried to make is that the United States government could have the most coherent policy in the world, but if it did not have the tools to implement it, that policy would be futile. Unfortunately, the only tools available to the United States in that part of the world are the Afghani and Pakistani governments.

In Pakistan, we have virtually no boots on the ground, so whatever we seek to achieve, in the end, has to go through the Pakistani government. The disadvantage of that is that the Pakistani government, up to now, has been a mighty weak reed to lean on. The advantage of that is that we will probably encounter less resentment targeted against the United States than we would encounter if we had a larger military footprint; and that is a good thing. And if the Pakistani government is belatedly focusing on the dangers presented to regional stability by the Taliban instead of being distracted by their previous focus on India, then hooray – perhaps we have a chance to achieve some degree of stability in that country. The odds are against us, but the recent change in Pakistani attitudes may give us a chance.

In Afghanistan, the situation is even bleaker. There are two issues that we confront immediately in that country. The first is whether the number of American combat troops in Afghanistan should be increased substantially as General McChrystal has apparently recommended. The second is whether or not a counter insurgency approach (in plain English, nation building) has any real chance to succeed.

The problem with increasing the number of troops is that we become the lightning rod, and our presence runs the risk of inciting more anti-American sentiment that can become a

recruiting tool for the very forces we seek to curtail. The threat to the American homeland is posed by Al Qaeda, not by the loosely-defined Taliban. Yet the more U.S. troops we send to Afghanistan to fight the insurgency, the more we risk hardening them into an implacable enemy. If any adjustment is made in U.S. troop levels, it would be much better if those troops were focused on the job of training Afghan troops and police to take on the job of securing the population and maintaining law and order. But even there, we have to ask what is achievable. My understanding is that there have never been more than about 80,000 troops under the sway of the central government. Now we are told that we need to train up to 400,000 soldiers and police personnel. I think it is reasonable to ask whether that is a realistic and achievable goal. It is imperative that, even on this issue, we keep our expectations realistically modest.

The second issue is whether we should in fact engage in the kind of counter-insurgency nation-building that the General is apparently proposing. Intellectually, that might be the most coherent approach; but if we do not have the tools to accomplish it, that policy would be futile. And my honest assessment is that we don't. Our primary tool, the Afghan government, is bordering on the useless in that regard.

The other huge disadvantage to this approach is that, in my view, it is highly unachievable. If we were to engage in that kind of strategy, even its advocates tell us that it would require the willingness to make a commitment of a good ten years, and maybe double that. And the cost would be astronomical. The military cost alone would approach a trillion dollars or more. And that does not count the cost of economic and civilian aid to either Afghanistan or Pakistan. I simply do not believe that that kind of long term commitment is sustainable in this country. I do not believe the American people will buy it. A policy that is not sustainable is no policy at all; it is a hail marry pass that even Brett Favre would be highly unlikely to complete.

And there is a third disadvantage to this approach. Because it would drain the spirit of the country over that long period of time as well as draining the U.S. treasury, it would devour virtually any other priorities that the President or anyone in Congress had.

I wish I did not believe what I believe on this matter, but I was in Russia when the Russians were mired down in Afghanistan. At the height of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, they had 100,000 troops on the ground – which is what we would have if General McChrystal's reported recommendations are approved. I was shocked at how openly Soviet leaders would admit that the very fabric of their political system was being devoured by their misadventure in Afghanistan. I saw what it did to their country. We are a much richer and a much stronger country than they were, but we would still pay a price that is far too high.

That's why I believe we need to more narrowly focus our efforts and have a much more achievable and targeted policy in that region, or we run the risk of repeating the mistakes we made in Vietnam and the Russians made in Afghanistan.

There are some fundamental questions that I would ask of those who are suggesting that we follow a long term counterinsurgency strategy:

1. As an Appropriator I must ask, what will that policy cost and how will we pay for it? We are now in the middle of a fundamental debate over reforming our healthcare system. The President has indicated that it must cost less than \$900 billion over ten years and be fully paid for. The Congressional Budget Office has had four committees twisting themselves into knots in order to fit healthcare reform into that limit. CBO is earnestly measuring the cost of each competing healthcare plan. Shouldn't it be asked to do the same thing with respect to Afghanistan? If we add 40,000 troops and recognize the need for a sustained 10 year or longer commitment, as the architects of this plan tell us we do, the military costs alone would be over \$800 billion. And unlike the demands that are being made of the healthcare alternatives that they be deficit neutral, we've heard no such demand with respect to Afghanistan. I would ask how much will this entire effort cost, when you add in civilian costs and costs in Pakistan? And how would that impact the budget?

2. Do we really believe that there is an international consensus for such a long-term endeavor, or will we in fact, with the exception of some tokenism, be going it alone? Are we really prepared to "go it alone"?

3. What policy is in fact achievable? Not what policy is theoretically the most intellectually coherent, but which policy is actually achievable given the only tools we have in the region; the Afghani and Pakistani governments. Is there sufficient leadership, popular support, and political will, not in the U.S. but in Afghanistan, necessary for effective governance to take hold?

4. What makes us think that a much more aggressive and expansive role for U.S. troops will not harden elements of the Taliban and make them a more potent force, forcing them to stand up to the "occupier"?

5. Does it all add up? The so-called COIN, or counterinsurgency strategy, calls for a certain number of troops and police based on a country's population. In Afghanistan that equates to 600,000 people in uniform. But the Afghani government has never maintained more than 200,000 before. Can they really sustain a three-fold increase?

6. Do we really have the tools to overcome language, culture, history and a 90% illiteracy rate to sufficiently transform such a country?

Lastly, after the Healthcare reform effort is completed, this country still has four huge long-term challenges that will require a sustained national effort:

1. The need for further action to repair the fragility of our own economy and rebuild the capacity of our economy to provide desperately needed job growth;
2. The need for a long-term commitment to strengthen our national security by dramatically reshaping our energy policy – an effort that will require sustained and meaningful sacrifice by all elements of our society;
3. The need for long-term action to restore fiscal soundness by reigning in the federal deficit; and
4. The need for long-term action to extend the fiscal soundness of Social Security and Medicare.

All of those efforts will require incredibly skilled leadership and a long-term willingness of the entire society to face hard facts.

Will we really be able to sustain sufficient long-term public willingness to attack those problems if our national determination is drained by ten more years of what is already the second longest war in American history?

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